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MY TRANSFORMATION AS A PARTNER AND A LEARNER

Paul Wynkoop, Haverford College Class of 2020

Introduction

My experience as a student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges began in the fall of 2017. I was assigned to work with a faculty partner in a STEM field. She had previously worked at a nearby college of similar size and academic rigor, but with less of an atmosphere of collaboration than Haverford. I attended her class twice a week for the first 10-11 weeks of the semester and met with her weekly, and for the final weeks of the semester I met with her every Friday to discuss how things were going in class. The main issues we tried to address were: her beginning to work at an academic institution which had a self-governed and collaborative academic environment, along with a rigorous academic environment, and getting all students to engage during class.

Through my time working with my faculty partner, I learned pedagogical tools, discovered new ways to enhance my own learning, and formed a friendship. In this essay I share a number of the pedagogical issues my faculty partner and I explored and how these explorations transformed my own learning. Toward the end of the essay, I focus on a particular benefit to me as a learner and the friendship I formed with my faculty partner.

Joining the SaLT Program and Beginning My Partnership

I was introduced to SaLT program through my faculty advisor, who suggested I take a look at the program because I was interested in fairness and equality in classrooms. Granted, there was no guarantee I'd confront this issue head-on in my experience, but I took a closer look at the program and found its goals to be ones I found important. My partner was beginning her first semester teaching at Haverford, and I was to help her transition smoothly from her old college to Haverford, among other things. I met my partner the week before class started to go over the syllabus and general class structure. She was very friendly and warm, and we got along very well. We came up with a few things we thought we might notice during the first class that we might need to address, and we were both eager and excited to see what the first day of class would bring.

I was quite nervous as I entered the classroom on the first day of class. I didn't quite know what to expect; I had read the guidelines we were given regarding our responsibilities as student consultants, and I had spoken to my partner about how I would introduce myself to the class, but I still didn't know what the response would be like from the students, especially given that the class only had eleven students, nor did I know what exactly it would be like observing my partner as she taught. These fears were quelled soon after, as students smiled when I introduced myself and didn't seem to be bothered by the presence in the class of a student who was not learning the material. Further, within the first twenty minutes, I got a general feel for how my faculty partner would teach, and how I would go about observing and reflecting on the

interactions within the classroom. My experience within this classroom was different from any other experience I'd had as a student in other classes. I was accustomed to paying attention to *what* content was being taught, as opposed to *how* content was being taught. I felt a greater sense of responsibility towards the class, as I had a larger role than usual in determining how things were taught. This sense of responsibility galvanized me into coming into the class each day ready to observe carefully and thoroughly.

Working through Pedagogical Issues and the Effects on My Learning

My faculty partner introduced her class, its general rules and expectations, and her goals for the semester. This was fairly straightforward, as most professors, I have found, do this. However, what I found unusual (and, as I found out later, what other students found effective) was that she allowed discussion of the syllabus after she had read through it. This served two purposes: first, it gave students an opportunity to voice their own opinions about the syllabus, and gave them agency within the classroom, a common theme throughout my work with this faculty partner; and second, it made the normally mundane, tedious task of going over the class syllabus more engaging and dynamic.

Regarding student agency in the classroom, given how effective students felt it was, and how engaged students seemed to be when given more power over decisions within the classroom, I quickly realized how important a pedagogical skill student agency was. I started paying attention to pedagogical skills that my other professors would use in my classes, and ways that they could improve. There were certain strategies each of them would use that were more and less effective, and I learned strategies they used that I could bring in to my work with my faculty partner. This also began a gradual heightening of awareness regarding myself as a learner, as I elaborate upon later.

After working through the first few days of class, my faculty partner and I worked to identify issues we felt had arisen already. The first issue we addressed was that my faculty partner was not sure of what to expect with regards to interacting with students. For instance, she wondered if covering the guidelines for papers might imply that she didn't think the students were smart enough; she worried that their intelligence might be offended if she said a certain thing; etc. The way we worked through these issues was that I told her what I thought was "normal" for Haverford, and then she would ask the class during the week what they thought about the way she was interacting with them. This strategy of opening up the classroom for discussions was one that I felt was crucial in giving the students a say in what they wanted, while still allowing my faculty partner to make clear what she wanted from the class.

Students were given ample opportunities to determine the pace of lectures and the content they felt needed to be covered. What I came to realize is that students, by their own admission, felt more valued when they were given the opportunity to shape their classroom experience. There was a tangible difference between my other classes and this class with regards to how the professors taught. In my other classes, professors seemed to just teach the content, and were somewhat less flexible in changing their plans and teaching *to* students; they seemed more

concerned about whether or not they finished all that they had planned to get done, and not with the individual learning of their students.

The second issue we encountered was that at Haverford, there is an academic honor code (referenced hereafter as “Honor Code”), which states that students are entrusted with the responsibility of reporting their own academic violations and transgressions. My faculty partner had previously taught at an institution where such a system did not exist, so we worked on devising a system of interactions amongst students wherein they could collaborate with one another in compliance with the academic regulations that the Honor Code consists of. Through this process, I learned a few things. First, the Honor Code, even to Haverford students like myself, can be quite inaccessible. The language is often flowery, and there is simply so much content that it can be difficult to navigate. Additionally, the Honor Code is not very specific. It gives a few examples of academic transgressions that students should avoid, but there are a number of instances I have heard about and experienced in which the appropriate response is not given within the Honor Code.

After thinking and talking through all of this with my faculty partner, I had a new perspective on the Honor Code. The impression I was left with was that the Honor Code could stand to have a solidified, compacted form that covers basic academic collaboration and its standards, as well as similarly compacted sections covering what is expected from students following an academic transgression. Now, certainly, the basics, such as not directly quoting a source without quotation marks and proper citations, and paraphrasing without a citation, etc., were covered as I had previously thought, so there were some thoughts and knowledge I had of the Honor Code that stayed the same, but by and large, I realized that the Honor Code could use a bit of an overhaul.

The final issue we identified was that there were a few students who dominated the classroom environment. This issue was compounded by the fact that these students were males (and white, although everyone within this class was white), and that this brought with it additional power dynamics. One way that my faculty partner and I went about dealing with this issue was creating a list of guidelines for the class with regards to when students had a question; often times, the way these students would dominate the conversation and classroom would be by asking questions they already knew the answers to in order to seem smart. This would discourage other students from asking questions. The list of guidelines we created contained items such as: “It is acceptable to say ‘I don’t understand’” and “Outlaw performative questions during class unless otherwise explicitly permitted.” These were incredibly helpful in limiting the domination of the classroom by certain students.

Further, given my identity as a white male, I felt as though I came to understand more deeply just how crucial giving space to people of other, often marginalized identities is. I had long considered myself someone who understood when it was appropriate for me to talk and when it wasn’t, but hearing just how important it was to other students (one student said that she felt uncomfortable speaking in the classroom due to the male students dominating the conversations, and felt inferior because they seemed to rub in just how much they knew) that there be space for all identities made inclusion an even more important principle I aimed to enact and achieve. This led me to be even more conscious of my presence within my own classrooms and how I interacted with other students.

Trying New Pedagogical Approaches and the Effects on My Learning

While my faculty partner and I had our share of issues to deal with, we also got to try out a number of pedagogical strategies that neither of us had encountered before. Not all of these were revolutionary ideas, but we didn't have much experience with any of them. One such strategy was having students write a paper at the beginning of the semester about how they learned best (e.g. audio/visual learners, how much group work helped students), and how the professor (my faculty partner) could best help these students succeed in the classroom. This strategy helped the students by giving them an easy transition into work by beginning with a simpler activity, and gave my faculty partner an idea of what every student needed in order to succeed. What I got from identifying this pedagogical approach was that it would likely be beneficial for me to identify my own ways of learning best. I have long known that I am someone who benefits most from writing things down, but what I hadn't realized very much prior to working with my faculty partner was that I needed to work on condensing my notes. I often wrote everything down, instead of merely writing down what was important. This meant I wasn't actively synthesizing what I wrote. I came to this sudden epiphany while students were discussing what they had written within learning styles papers. Through work regarding learning styles and what students needed to succeed, I came to a better understanding of what was necessary in order for me to be most effective at learning.

A second strategy we used was having class discussions. Now, this doesn't seem that out of the box, but what made the discussions different is that they were about grading, the structure of the class, and the due dates for homework. What I thought was especially effective, though, and what other students later told me was very effective, was having my faculty partner set some hard guidelines that couldn't be changed, and then have some that were flexible as students saw fit. Furthermore, after I had students fill out a midsemester feedback form, they had a discussion about their answers. This discussion proved exceedingly helpful in establishing more class guidelines and rules governing student-professor interactions. What I learned from these pedagogical approaches is that, in many instances, there are limits to student agency. At least from my experience, having a balance of both student and professor input is helpful in determining how class guidelines should be established. Additionally, while mid-semester feedback forms are helpful in and of themselves, having an opportunity to go over and explain one's answers really seemed to open students up to deeper reflections about the classroom environment and student interactions.

Two Particular Benefits of My Partnership: Deepening Attention and Building Relationships

While I know from her feedback that the partnership benefitted my faculty partner and her classroom, it also benefitted me! I have mentioned multiple ways that this was the case, but there are two more. One has to do with a general change I saw in my ability to pay attention, and the other has to do with building relationships with faculty in general.

One of the starkest differences I noticed about myself over the course of the semester was that my attention to detail and just my focus in general improved. I have a habit of zoning out in classes if I'm bored or just generally antsy, but this habit decreased drastically as I worked with my faculty partner. Because I was forced to pay attention to every little interaction and behavior within the classroom in order to identify potential areas of growth for my faculty partner and her classroom, it rubbed off in my own academic experience! For example, in my lecture halls, I had had a tendency to zone out every now and then and tune back in every few minutes. However, what I felt myself gradually begin to do was to pay attention for the entirety of the class, and I would make mental connections in my head between concepts and work to understand them rather than merely write them down. Then, when it came time to study for exams, I found that I had already synthesized a lot of the information already, rather than learning it for the first time, which can happen when I just write things down word-for-word from the slides and zone out every now and then.

Additionally, not to be too sentimental, but my faculty partner was just a genuinely kind human being. I still say hi to her when I see her walking across campus, and sometimes I have time just to chat with her about how her classes are going and how her family is. I have not really had too close of a relationship with any of my professors prior to my faculty partner, so I found this to be a great new experience. What really made this experience great was that I worked with a professor who shared my goal of making class more accessible and engaging. It made my job so much easier and more exciting when I had someone who was equally willing and able to come up with her own ideas and strategies, and who I could bounce ideas off of, and vice versa. It is so encouraging to know that there are professors who really care about the learning process as much as students do.

Conclusion

Throughout my time working with my TLI partner, I learned many things. I learned how discussion can serve as an important tool in establishing classroom rules and procedures. I learned ways that students could realize when they were speaking too much or too little, and how to encourage students who may be nervous about asking questions to feel more confident in what they ask professors and other students. I learned to pay attention to detail better, and how I could focus more effectively in the classroom. Most of all, though, I got to witness a truly dynamic, inclusive classroom environment in which the professor facilitated conversations, addressed issues within the classroom, and helped students learn. From this, I now have a perfect example of what an ideal classroom really looks like, and I have some tools that I may be able to use in the future. The whole experience has given me much to be thankful for, and I can't wait to work with more faculty partners in the future!